



George Washington's Unimpeachable Character

by Burton Folsom

Summary

The Father of Our Country is hailed not only as America's first president, but also as a man of towering integrity. Washington's commitment to his principles on the battlefield and in the Oval Office, sometimes against political and popular resistance, ultimately helped him earn respect for our nation.

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This year marks the 200th anniversary of the death of George Washington. Most Americans think they know a lot about him—from his dramatic leadership in the American Revolution to his service as the first president of the United States. But what many Americans seem to have forgotten is that Washington built his career (and thus the foundations of our country) on high character and integrity.

Character, one humorist observed, is what you display when you think no one is looking. A generation after Washington's death, the statesman Daniel Webster concluded that "America has furnished to the world the character of Washington, and if our American institutions had done nothing else, that alone would have entitled them to the respect of mankind." Why did Washington's character so thoroughly impress Americans of the 18th and 19th centuries?

Character is best tested under pressure—and for Washington the most dramatic testing was his winter at Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War. He was commanding a deeply demoralized army. He had lost all major battles against the British Redcoats, who had just captured the American capitol at Philadelphia. He had retreated 18 miles north to Valley Forge where he helped his soldiers build log cabins, sharing their misery and lack of food. That winter of 1777-78 was bitterly cold and Washington lost almost a dozen men every day to desertion or death.

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The country forgave Washington for his mistakes over a government-run fur company. This American Fur Company warehouse (c. 1903) on Mackinac Island is a remnant of the private fur industry that succeeded where government failed.

"Poor food—hard lodging—cold weather—fatigue—nasty clothes—nasty cooking—vomit half my time . . ." wrote Dr. Albigen Waldo about the tribulations of Valley Forge. Washington desperately urged Congress to send him food, but instead the Congress advised him to steal food from farmers nearby. Such theft might have solved the short-term problem, but it failed Washington's character test. America could never endure, Washington believed, if it could not earn the respect of its own citizens. He angered

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Congress by rejecting its advice and promising instead to hang any soldier caught stealing food—even though farmers were selling their corn and beef to the British, who paid in gold.

James Thomas Flexner, whose biography of Washington won a Pulitzer Prize citation, observed that “Congress was more than ever outraged that Washington would not take what the army needed from the inhabitants by bayonet point.” Flexner concluded that “Washington believed that what was morally most desirable was likely to be politically most valuable” in the long run.

Washington’s honesty bore fruit in the short run as well. The starving army was impressed by Washington’s integrity. His men trained hard that winter, leaving bloody footprints in the snow. The next summer brought a smaller but tougher fighting unit that stood up to the seasoned British army for the first time at the Battle of Monmouth. With that victory, Washington took a giant step in ousting the British and winning independence for his country.

During Washington’s presidency, his character would be tested often but it served him and the nation well. For example, he recognized that America’s credit abroad, and its integrity at home, depended on honoring its war debt. Some Americans wanted to renege on payments we owed to patriots at home and the French abroad who had invested in our war for independence. Others, like James Madison, wanted to repay some, but not all, of the debt. Washington saw this as a character issue and helped persuade Congress to pass a revenue tariff to pay all our debts and establish our credit as a nation worthy of international respect.

Politicians of weak character are often second-guessed and challenged on their motives. Washington’s strong character helped Americans forgive him when he made errors in judgment. One of these errors involved the Michigan Territory, which was newly formed during his presidency. Washington worried that the powerful British in Canada would dominate the Michigan Territory if we didn’t support a government-operated fur company to challenge them. It proved to be a colossal failure that was later given a mercy killing by Congress; private fur traders instead emerged to challenge the British and keep Michigan strongly loyal to the American flag.

Few contemporaries blamed Washington for this error or for others he made. His character helped protect him from the inevitable nit-pickers, eager to find fault. Washington’s example of character provides lessons to ponder not only for politicians of today, but for all Americans as we remember him two centuries after his death in 1799.

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Congress advised General Washington to feed his troops by having them steal food from farmers. Instead, he promised to hang any soldier caught stealing food. Such theft might have solved a short-term problem, but it failed Washington’s character test.